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VZCZCXRO3642
PP RUEHCI
DE RUEHKT #0342/01 0851013
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
P 251013Z MAR 08
FM AMEMBASSY KATHMANDU
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 8217
INFO RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI 2310
RUEHKA/AMEMBASSY DHAKA 1986
RUEHIL/AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD 4736
RUEHLM/AMEMBASSY COLOMBO 6703
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON 5952
RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING 6379
RUEHCI/AMCONSUL KOLKATA 4088
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHDC
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC
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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 KATHMANDU 000342

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE
SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: N/A
TAGS: PGOV EAID KWMN KHIV KDEM NP
SUBJECT: NEPAL: U.S. MISSION VISIT TO MORANG AND
SUNSARI DISTRICT FOCUSES ON ELECTIONS AND COMMUNITY
DEVELOPMENT PROJECTS

Summary

¶1. (U) During a recent two-day visit to Biratnagar
and neighboring Sunsari District in the eastern
Terai region of Nepal, the Ambassador and USAID
Mission Director discussed electoral preparations
and the security context with local government
officials and domestic election observers. They
also visited USAID field sites for community-based
neo-natal care, a womenQs micro-credit group
receiving leadership training, and a community-
outreach radio program. Accompanied by the country
representative for UNICEF, the delegation visited
two UNICEF-funded projects benefiting women and
children in the two districts.

Election Preparations Under Way

¶2. (U) In the course of a March 16-18 trip to
Biratnagar, the capital of Morang District, and to
neighboring Sunsari District, the Ambassador and
USAID Mission Director met with local government
officials, representatives of a domestic election
monitoring alliance and ordinary citizens to get a
personal impression of the poll preparations and
security environment in the volatile Eastern Terai
region. The local authorities, including the
District Election Officers in both districts,
claimed that the preparations for the upcoming
Constituent Assembly elections are on track. The
Chief District Officers and representatives of the
police and armed police in both districts claimed to
be making progress in improving the law-and-order
situation by arresting criminal elements. However,
all expressed some concern about the threats by
armed groups from the Indian border areas to disrupt
the polls if the government does not bring them to
the negotiating table.

¶3. (U) There were visible indications of campaigning
by all the major parties, including the newly
registered Madhesi regional parties. Each of the
four villages visited by the Ambassador and the
USAID Mission Director had heard about the election
date and expressed enthusiasm to participate in the

poll. However, most people had a poor understanding of the voting process and the new, mixed election system. In addition, most people expected a quick announcement of election results. Even the local officials and domestic election observers anticipated election results in two or three days, whereas the Election Commission has indicated to post that it is expecting to require a minimum of three weeks to finalize the election results.

Improving the Health of Disadvantaged Communities
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¶4. (U) The Ambassador and USAID Mission Director also visited a number of USAID and UNICEF-funded community programs, most of which focused on the health and welfare of women and children in the poorest and most disadvantaged social groups. In two separate Dalit, or QuntouchableQ villages, USAID and UNICEF are supporting, respectively, a community-based intervention to treat bacterial infections in newborns and a womenQs group to develop local strategies to improve nutrition, hygiene, and access to education for their children. In close collaboration with the local health and development offices, both projects are showing impressive results in improving social indicators, such as maternal and child mortality and child malnutrition. The Ambassador also accompanied the Country Director of UNICEF to a Working ChildrenQs Club in Biratnagar, which receives UNICEF assistance to promote child rights.

Reaching Out Through Radio

¶5. (U) The delegation visited the site of a community-radio outreach program, supported by USAIDQs Office of Transition Initiatives (OTI). The radio program, named QPeace Traveler,Q visits three villages a week to record community discussions on topics related to the peace process and Constituent Assembly elections. The questions and comments of local people, representing all castes and ethnic groups, are recorded and transformed into a radio program. A local expert, often a representative of the local administration, answers the questions posed by the community and the program is translated and broadcast in two languages: Maithili, one of the dominant languages of the Eastern Terai, and Nepali. In this way, both Maithili and Nepali-speaking communities can learn what issues and questions the other linguistic community is posing. The radio program has been wildly popular for giving a voice to local communities and providing a critical link between communities and local government.

Comment

¶7. (SBU) Since the agreement between the Government and Madhesi parties at the end of February, the climate for election preparations has improved dramatically in the Eastern Terai. However, the hurdles to a peaceful election process are still high. The potential impact of the armed groups is a factor that could disrupt campaigning and keep fearful voters away from the polls on election day. The short timeframe to put all the election machinery in place is likely to have a negative impact on the efficacy and reach of voter education. Misconceptions about the time required to finalize election results could also increase tensions in the immediate post-election period. Despite the

uncertain political environment, it is encouraging
to see that development programs are under way which
are having visible impacts in the most disadvantaged
communities. In the post-election environment, the
challenge will be to step up these development
efforts so the people of the Terai see the benefits
of peaceful participation in mainstream politics,
rather than choosing more radical political
solutions.

POWELL